1. Bringing shared visions to life

I'm kind of homesick for a country
To which I've never been before;
No sad goodbyes will there be spoken,
And time won't matter any more.

I'm looking now across the river
Where my faith will end in sight…

Sweet Beulah Land, Squire E. Parsons Jr.

Mrs Siwela is all smiles. Her brooms, with their elegant hand-crafted binding, have won a prize at the Gweru Agricultural Show and are selling well, lifting her and her family out of debt. She is reaping the rewards of a new way to solve problems in which she and her neighbours formulated a plan that helped them to improve their own livelihoods. Not only is she better off, but she has new-found confidence and an enthusiasm to control her own destiny. She achieved this through a process in which she and her neighbours shared their vision for the future, constructed a formal model of their understanding of the resources at their disposal, and then used the model to explore a range of options that might help them to reach their vision. There are many situations, the world over, where people and natural resources interact in this way.

Figure 1. Batanai broomgrass workers with handcrafted bindings

This book is about encouraging people to share visions and helping them to progress from these visions to take appropriate actions that will help realise their vision. The choice of appropriate actions is a key aspect of this book, and we dwell on some ways to ensure that chosen actions are effective ways to make progress in realizing a vision.

While much of what we introduce here is new, the underpinning concept is as old as civilization itself. Ever since people first began to use tools thousands of years ago, they have sought to depict the world around them, through cave paintings and dance rituals rich in symbolism and allegory. People not only depicted the world as it was, but also as they wanted it to be. In this book, we draw on this innate ability of people to imagine an achievable future, and offer techniques to help realize that future.

Depending on our circumstances and frame of mind – who we are, where we live and what resources we can access – the future may look bleak or rosy. Nonetheless, irrespective of our situation, most of us dream of a better future. Often such dreams are not idle daydreams, but are visions of a future that can be attained – if enough people share the vision and are prepared to cooperate. This book is about how to take such a dream and turn it into reality.

A simple example

The people of Batanai village in central Zimbabwe knew that their broomgrass harvest was not sustainable, but until they met Richard, they could not see an alternative – they had to feed and clothe their families so they had to carry on harvesting broomgrass. Richard Nyirenda[1] gained their confidence, and introduced the concepts of structured learning and participatory modelling. These processes helped the villagers gain a new understanding of their broomgrass resource and the marketing opportunities for their products. With the help of Richard and his team, the broomgrass workers developed a shared vision, formulated a model that allowed them to explore their options, brainstormed to find innovative options, and devised a way to realize their vision. They gained the confidence to put these ideas into practice, and empowered themselves to create and adhere to new communal rules to achieve fair and wise use of their communal resources. As a result, the broomgrass on the *vlei* is now more productive, people are making better brooms, and they are earning more money than ever before. In Batanai, structured learning through participatory modelling has been the catalyst that has helped the community to change its destiny.

The range of applications

This book draws on three case studies. We have already outlined the case of the broomgrass collectors in Batanai, a simple case-study dealing with a single resource (broomgrass), a small community (the broomgrass collectors of Batanai village), a confined location (the *vlei*, a seasonally inundated grassland), and a limited timeframe (a

few years). However, the techniques we describe are not confined to such simple situations. On the contrary, the benefits of structured learning become more apparent in more complex situations where these methods of coping with complexity may reveal ways forward that might otherwise not be found.

We offer two such examples. Rajendra Singh, the River-maker, has received many accolades for bringing rivers back to life in arid Rajasthan. In his work, Rajendra encountered considerable opposition from various vested interests. We illustrate how construction and discussion of simulation models could have helped to overcome this opposition and to explore consequences more productively. The River-maker case-study is wider in scope than the broomgrass case-study, as it deals with the availability of surface and ground water at the catchment scale, as it is affected by people's support for, and opposition to constructing percolation tanks that harvest surface water. Our third case-study is even more ambitious, and deals with chronic deterioration of several natural resources in the Mafungautsi region of Zimbabwe. It deals with forests, crops, rangelands, water, livestock, and people and their land-use decisions, all interacting at the landscape scale and affected by people's decisions about land use. There is no pressing problem that needs to be solved; rather there is an awareness of a chronic situation in which several resources (including social capital) are slowly being depleted without any durable benefit to society. The core of all three case studies is an intimate interaction between people and natural resources.

Each of the simulation models developed has different characteristics. The River-maker case-study deals with daily rainfall but looks at catchment-wide impacts on river flow and water depth in wells over several years. The broomgrass case-study uses monthly harvests to examine what will happen to the broomgrass on the vlei over a few short years, while the Mafungautsi case-study deals with many weekly events to make inferences about a wide range of resources at the landscape scale over many years. The structured learning and participatory modelling approaches that we advocate are equally applicable to all these diverse situations. In each case, the models and resulting ideas about what might happen to natural resources if different actions are taken have been made by local people rather than external experts. Certainly, these people were sometimes guided by experienced facilitators, and we do emphasise the need for good technical support, but everything we advocate in this book is designed to be accessible and useful to anyone who wishes to try.

Route map of the book

We have promised to help you – the reader – and your team to take a dream and turn it into reality. This can, and has been done using several steps which form the chapters of this book:

1. recognise the potential (this chapter),
2. agree on a common problem,
3. share a vision,

4. make that vision explicit,
5. substantiate assumptions,
6. explore options and implications, and then
7. implement what has been learned.

Hopefully, this brief introduction has served to whet your appetite. We now continue to examine how to find common ground amongst people with diverse interests.

Notes

1. T. Mutimukuru, R. Nyirenda and F. Matose (2004) 'Learning amongst ourselves: Adaptive forest management through social learning in Zimbabwe', in C.J.P. Colfer (ed.) *The Equitable Forest: Diversity and Community in Sustainable Resource Management*. Resources for the Future, pp 186-206.